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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHJA/AMEMBASSY JAKARTA PRIORITY 0605

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY 0161

RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000270

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE PASS TO EAP/MLS AND S/CT DAN MAHANTY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: ENGAGING CAMBODIA'S MUSLIM MINORITY THROUGH DIALOG
AND DIPLOMACY

REF: A. 07 PHNOM PENH 1363

[1B.](#) 08 PHNOM PENH 968

[1C.](#) PHNOM PENH 170

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

[11.](#) (SBU) SUMMARY: Although numbers vary, it is estimated that there are approximately 400,000 Muslims in Cambodia. This makes them the largest minority group, accounting for over 2.5 percent of the total population. Over the past year, the U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh has been able to focus attention and added resources on Cambodia's minority Muslim population, with gratifying and often tangible results. Through dialog, education, and public outreach such as Iftar dinners and a recent weeklong series on Islam for law enforcement, funded by the Ambassador's Fund for Counter-Terrorism, we have seen an increase in positive sentiment toward the U.S. coupled with enhanced understanding. END SUMMARY.

Background

[12.](#) (SBU) The majority of Cambodia's Muslims, commonly known as the Cham or Khmer Islam, belong to the Sunni Shafi'i school of Islam. From 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge ruthlessly targeted the Cham, annihilating all but a few of the Islamic leaders, teachers, and scholars. In an effort to rebuild, Muslim communities eagerly accepted outside assistance. Cambodia is currently home to several non-profit Islamic organizations which receive tens of millions of dollars of support from Saudi, Kuwaiti, and other donors (Ref A). The Muslim population in Cambodia is viewed as generally moderate by the Cambodian government and the Cham themselves. However, Cambodia has all of the elements which the former Director of the CIA, James Woolsey, considered to be a "poisonous brew," namely "drug trafficking, links between drug traffickers and violent extremist groups, smuggling of illegal aliens, massive financial and bank fraud, arms smuggling" and "political intimidation and corruption." Extreme poverty, low education levels, high levels of illiteracy, poor health indicators, porous borders, endemic corruption, and weak rule of law all contribute to what experts believe could make Cambodia a soft target for extremist groups, as evidenced by the 2002-03 Hambali link (Ref B).

Investing in People

¶13. (SBU) Over the past year, the embassy has therefore embarked on an aggressive Muslim Outreach strategy which includes: high-level contacts with Muslim leaders; military medical missions and infrastructure development in predominantly Muslim areas; English language micro-scholarships; USAID's basic education program which supports minority population educational access; Embassy hosted Iftar dinners in Phnom Penh and the provinces, and the implementation of the Ambassador,s Fund for CT.

Success Story - Provincial Iftar

¶14. (SBU) The traditional Iftar in Phnom Penh, which is usually held either at the Ambassador's residence or the Embassy, has been well received over the years. However, while planning the most recent Iftar, it became apparent that the Embassy was targeting the same individuals each year who were already knowledgeable about and supportive of the United States. PolOff and PAO therefore worked with Cambodia's Mufti, who is appointed by the King as the Supreme Leader of all Muslims in the country, to identify a Muslim community in Cambodia which had received little or no attention from the Embassy. We then coordinated with the head Imam from this community in Kampot province to organize a dinner at a local establishment which could produce a Halal meal for 120 guests, no small feat in the Cambodian hinterlands. During the planning stages, the Western hoteliers in the area

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expressed skepticism that such an event would have any sort of impact given the cold and sometimes hostile relations between Westerners and the Muslim communities in the area. However, upon subsequent trips to Kampot, those same hoteliers gleefully relayed to embassy guests a significant thawing in relations between the two communities, with the Muslims noticeably more friendly toward the Westerners in town than prior to the Iftar.

Building on Success - Ambassador's Fund for CT

¶15. (SBU) The Embassy has built on this success by again reaching out to Kampot Muslims, as well as other communities in Kampong Cham province and Phnom Penh, during our weeklong "Understanding Islam" series for law enforcement sponsored by the Ambassador's Fund for Counter-Terrorism. Cambodian law enforcement officers, as well as government officials, Imams, and Muslim community members took part in seminars and forums designed to promote a closer relationship between the law enforcement and Muslim communities in an effort to deter Islamic extremism in Cambodia. A U.S. expert on violent extremism, Dr. Sherifa Zuhur, presented both basic concepts of Islam as well as approaches to violent extremism. Dr. Zuhur's presentation was complemented by information on local Muslim history and culture presented by Zakaryya Adam, a Member of Parliament and the Vice-Mufti, and was paired with the work of two Indonesian experts who we recruited via APP Medan (NOTE: APP Medan has been more than generous with their time, contacts and outreach expertise and was instrumental in identifying key regional speakers for our program in collaboration with Embassy Jakarta. END NOTE). The first, a rector of a large university, addressed the issue of Islam in the region, and specifically the ways that the Indonesian government had adapted their educational and legal systems to address the concerns of the Muslim majority. The second, a colonel from Indonesia,s famous anti-terrorist Detachment 88, gave an attention-grabbing talk on how Indonesia has

worked to identify and combat extremism in smaller communities through community policing and law enforcement reforms. The weeklong event, which the Ambassador opened in Phnom Penh, received extensive positive press coverage.

¶6. (SBU) The holistic approach of the "Understanding Islam" seminar provided the audience, made up of members from the law enforcement and Muslim communities, a top to bottom view of Islam in the world and in Southeast Asia, and of the challenges that law enforcement faces when policing minority communities. Leaders from both sides commented that this was the first time that the two groups had ever been brought together to share their experiences, and also stressed that additional and more involved seminars were needed to build on this initial progress.

Future Needs

¶7. (SBU) During the course of the year, there have been two recurring requests from the Muslim community. One has been for increased assistance with education to enable them to more fully contribute to society and the economy (Ref C). Post will continue to address low education levels through USAID's basic education and Skills for Life programs. The second request, repeated during the Kampot seminar last week, is to develop programs for Muslim women which would allow them to better understand their rights under Islam. Post plans to use some of the remaining money from the Ambassador's Fund, designed for development of publications, to address this need while also providing law enforcement with additional information on Islamic beliefs and practices.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: By reaching out on a more grassroots level to the provincial communities, the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh has been able to positively present America and our values including tolerance and religious freedom. In the process, we have also been able to dispense key messages about the threat of extremism. In every encounter, we have reinforced the Administration's policy that the "United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam." We have had encouraging feedback that the programs the U.S. has initiated

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have indeed shown all of Cambodia that our actions are commensurate with our words. END COMMENT.
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